

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

What Trump's Indictment Means for His Political Future — and His Party's

Source: Noah Bierman, *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 2023

Donald Trump is the first former president in history to face a criminal indictment. Here's what his indictment might mean for his political future — and the Republican Party's.

No, a prosecutor in New York did not just hand Trump the election.

Some Republicans have claimed that indicting Trump will only aid his effort to regain the White House in 2024.

“Most people on our side think it's a never-ending effort to take a wrecking ball to Trump,” Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican, said on “The Daily Show” earlier this month. “So yeah, I think it'll help him.”

Trump has survived numerous scandals, before, during and since his presidency. His approval in polls has generally stayed at near 40%, dipping about 5 points after the Jan. 6 insurrection set off by his attempts to overturn the presidential election.

As *The Times'* David Lauter wrote last week, Trump has been in the public eye since at least the 1980s, and most people have a fixed opinion of him.

But even as Trump has retained a base of committed voters of 35% to 40%, that was not enough to win him reelection in 2020.

To reclaim the White House, Trump needs to increase his support, which he has been unable to do.

“If every scandal binds 99% of his base closer to him and alienates just 1%, that is still a losing formula,” Politico columnist Alex Burns wrote last week.

Republicans remain tethered to Trump.

Trump may not gain majority support, but his indictment has shown, once again, that most Republicans are afraid to cross him.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, the Bakersfield Republican who owes his position to Trump, followed his lead in accusing Manhattan Dist. Atty. Alvin Bragg, a Democrat, of “an outrageous abuse of power,” and ordered House committees last week to investigate the prosecutor, even though no one in Congress had seen the evidence against Trump. Other Republicans followed suit.

Former presidents — especially those who lost reelection — rarely wield that sort of power over their parties. Trump owes his command of the GOP to the passion of his base. Many Republican members of Congress represent gerrymandered, deep-red congressional districts in which the threat of losing to a Trump-backed opponent in a Republican primary is greater than the threat of losing to a Democrat in a general election.

Although using his base to keep elected Republicans in line enables Trump's political survival, it's also a dangerous formula. Last week, Trump was warning an indictment would bring “potential death & destruction” in the country, echoing the language he used to stir up the mob that stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Trump could still win the nomination, and the presidency.

The Constitution does not prohibit Trump from serving again as president, even from jail.

Republican presidential primaries, like gerrymandered congressional districts, give outside power to candidates with committed bases of supporters. Trump still leads in Republican primary polls. If he does win the nomination, he is likely to face President Biden, who is now 80 and has also struggled with low approval numbers.

Big obstacles stand in Trump's way. The first is Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican who has tried to channel Trump's populism minus the scandals as he pursues a likely presidential bid. He criticized Bragg this week, but then took a sly shot at Trump.

"I don't know what goes into paying hush money to a porn star to secure silence over some type of alleged affair. I just — I can't speak to that," DeSantis said.

If Trump manages to defeat DeSantis, he will still face a tough battle against Biden, who demonstrated his ability to build a coalition in 2020. The 2022 midterm election, in which Republicans underperformed historical trends, showed that Trump continues to be a drag on his party.

But winning the nomination would still give Trump a puncher's chance at the White House. He proved that in 2016, when he defeated former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whose own candidacy was hurt by an investigation into her use of a private server to store her government emails.

Trump is the first former president to be indicted, but others have come close.

Richard Nixon left the White House in 1974 believing he was going to jail. He even asked Egil Krogh, a former aide who served time for Watergate crimes, what it was like behind bars.

"It was highly likely" that Nixon would have been indicted if President Ford had not preemptively pardoned him, said Timothy Naftali, former director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

Ford had his own reasons for pardoning Nixon, including the fact that Ford had been appointed vice president before taking over the top job from Nixon, Naftali said. Ford, insecure about his own legitimacy, very much wanted the news media and the public to stop talking about his predecessor. Nixon had already resigned in disgrace, making it less pressing that he face further consequences.

Bill Clinton, with hours remaining in office, admitted to lying under oath about Monica Lewinsky to avoid prosecution for perjury in a deal with special prosecutor Robert W. Ray. Warren Harding died in office, but if he hadn't, he might well have faced consequences for scandals that came to light afterward.

"We haven't had a lot of people with criminal clouds around them as they leave the White House," Naftali said. "We've had a lot of flawed individuals in the White House, but not that many, fortunately."

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about Donald Trump's indictment? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.